



— STATE OF SOUTH DAKOTA —
OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

KRISTI NOEM | GOVERNOR

March 21, 2022

The Honorable Denis McDonough
Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary McDonough:

On March 14th, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) released the Asset and Infrastructure Review (AIR) initial recommendations to change the delivery of veterans' healthcare. These recommendations would severely impact the care of the veterans in South Dakota and surrounding states. I would like to state my strong opposition to these plans. Frankly, these recommendations represent a betrayal of our veterans who offered to sacrifice life and limb to protect us and our freedoms.

The MISSION Act of 2018, which I supported, was meant to offer more care for veterans, not less. But you are using this same Act to defend the changes that the VA is proposing. Your recommendations would reduce or eliminate direct care in communities across our state.

South Dakota is one of the most rural states in the nation. Because of this, centralizing care will create a heavy burden for our veterans as they seek out the care they have earned through their service to our country. Our tribal veterans, in particular, will in many cases have to travel greater distances to seek services. Many of these individuals lack the transportation needed to make such travel a reality, and surging gas prices, as a result of the Biden Administration's energy policies, make it even more difficult for our veterans to drive such long distances.

In December of 2011, the VA announced a plan to close the Hot Springs facility and move most services to Rapid City. I traveled to Hot Springs and heard from the veterans this facility serves, the community that always puts these veterans first, and the staff that directly cares for those who have served bravely. I was convinced of the value of this place of healing. I led a House of Representatives Veterans Affairs Committee Field

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Hearing and brought the Committee's Chairman and Vice Chairman to Hot Springs to demonstrate that it truly was a place worth saving.

In 2020, our efforts finally paid off, and the VA rescinded the Record of Decision to close this site. Now, barely two years later, the VA has hit the reset button. This time, however, it is worse because the recommendation impacts four veterans' healthcare facilities across the state of South Dakota.

Eliminating the medical centers in lieu of community based outpatient clinics (CBOCs) in Hot Springs and Fort Meade will not enhance care. Veterans from multiple states will have increased costs and travel distances when seeking their care. Some will simply decide to delay necessary treatment because of these burdens, which will harm their long-term health while increasing the long-term costs of their healthcare.

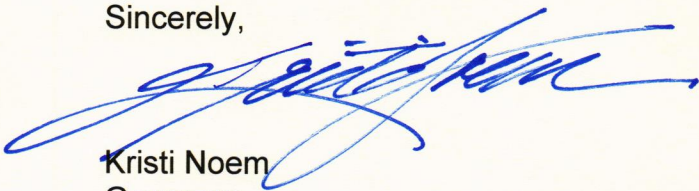
Closing the CBOC at Wagner will mostly impact our tribal communities. This facility is scarcely more than a decade old, having opened in 2010. We have documented time and time again the failings with Indian Health Service, so simply dumping these veterans into that system is not an option. While I support including telemedicine where it makes sense, it alone cannot replace hands-on examination. And while we have made significant gains in recent years, many corners of my state, particularly our tribal communities, do not yet have the necessary broadband internet connections to realize your vision of moving more veterans online for their appointments when alternative community care is unavailable.

The emergency department and surgical wing in Sioux Falls has seen significant investment by the VA. While we are blessed to have two robust healthcare systems in South Dakota's largest city, we have seen wait times, especially for specialty care, that concern any reasonable observer. Many of our veterans chose to live in Sioux Falls in order to have ready access to those services the VA has historically provided.

I fully support the March 15th letter from U.S. Senators John Thune and Mike Rounds and Congressman Dusty Johnson to you pointing out these same concerns. We stand united in our opposition to your proposal.

I look forward to further conversations on how these short-sighted recommendations do not reflect the best interests of our veteran communities. I expect that the VA will approach such conversations with an open mind and open ears. And I hope that we can eventually come to a solution that shifts these recommendations and prioritizes the healthcare of the men and women who sacrificed so much to defend us and our freedoms.

Sincerely,



Kristi Noem
Governor